

FEMINIST CYBERPUNK: GENDER AND RACE

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ABSTRACT

Feminist cyberpunk, a second wave of the classic cyberpunk of the 1980s, was marked by a prominent presence of gender/sexuality in an otherwise masculine narrative mode, as well as a sudden removal of Japan as the evil force of the future that would dominate the inhuman technological future. Japan was replaced by a random variety of baffling places, and classic cyberpunk, which was accused of heavy neo-orientalizing tendencies in its ideological portrayal of Japan, also known as Techno-Orientalism, had seemingly moved away from this trend with its second feminist wave. However, my analysis suggests that the move is far from innocent, and is a reiteration of Techno-Orientalism, only this time, replacing Japan with other countries to eventually justify the narrative of the indispensability of America in the future.

Keywords: Cyberpunk, Techno-Orientalism, Capitalism, Ideology, Japan, America

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INTRODUCTION

Considerable amount of critical attention has been directed at classic cyberpunk, fairly accusing its “counter-culture revolutionary zeal” that celebrated the “high-tech, low-life” (Sterling xii) narratives to represent the loner, marginalized low-brow hacker heroes fighting ugly powerful multinational corps, of being unmistakably quiet on the burgeoning social narratives of gender, sexuality and race. While the classic cyberpunk wave was dying out in the late 1980s, after a brief spurt that lasted less than a decade, a new set of critics and authors simultaneously were rewriting these narratives: critics like Donna Haraway posited critical cyborg and posthuman theories that situated cyberpunk outside the realm of the humanistic horror, probing the unnecessary paranoia projected by classic cyberpunk, while a slew of new authors such as Marge Piercy, Maureen F. McHugh, Linda Nagata, Laura Mixon and Nicola Griffith, among

many others, penned fictional narratives that brought gender and sexuality to the fore.

Along with that, this new second wave that revived the cyberpunk mode of narrative in terms of gender, also broke away from another unwritten rule of classic cyberpunk: that the Japanese must always be the villains. While also significantly altering some premises about the plot that were taken for granted, feminist cyberpunk, as this new wave was called, also unwittingly reinforced a stance that it had apparently rejected. Classic cyberpunk has been accused of empowering women only to a slight degree, by giving them a role necessary to the success of the hero - however, she is always also an eye-candy, a sexually-charged figure who seemed to only become more alluring both for the protagonist and the readers by this combination of skill, power and sex, emptied of its emotional, sentimental baggage.

Feminist cyberpunk attacked this mode of representation of women to not only make them central characters without being subjected to the male gaze or catered to the male audience, but also to open up a discourse that discussed gender and sexuality, a feminist and queer writing and reading of cyberpunk fiction.

Wolmark, in noting cyberpunk's aforesaid reluctance, remarks:

Characters like Molly Millions or even Laura, Bruce Sterling's heroine from the 'professional'-management class in his novel *Islands in the Net* (1988) are indicative of the presence and influence of feminist SF, but they cannot be said to be an expression of cyberpunk's own willingness to tackle questions of gender identity and subjectivity (121).

However, a second charge levied upon classic cyberpunk was that of Techno-Orientalism. America was gripped in a paranoia at the possibility of the Japanese overtaking them on the global stage, both in cultural and economic terms in near future, creating a further imminent threat of political domination of Japan by gradually displacing the USA in the credible near future. Fuelled by the 60s and 70s' rise of Japan (without any help from America, more importantly) as a nation that flourished economically and scientifically, while creating a global market for its cultural products, namely anime and manga, that almost gave Disney and American comics market a run for its money, as well as the overturning the American propaganda about the permanency of damage it had caused its enemies, pushed classic

cyberpunk in a wave of fear that led it to stereotype the Japanese as uncivilized and inhuman, a species that rose by ruthless ambition and rejected the idea of democracy and civilization.

The cyberpunk "credible" future, then, was marked by chaos and autocracy, led by Japanese *zaibatsus* and waiting to be saved by the American soul. Feminist cyberpunk, curiously, broke away from this model, and sought new geographical settings as its base. Consequently, a large number of texts employed varied locations, causing the genre to be diluted, since some taken-for-granted markers of cyberpunk went missing, like the universally-in-the-American-sensibility-hated Japanese, and replaced with seemingly innocent and less controversial random places such as China, South-East Asia or the Middle East. While some novels heavily critique the "Western" presence in their fictional settings, such as Nagata's *The Bohr Maker* or Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl*, some novels simply reiterate the necessity of America as the saviour of civilized hence, the future. While it seems random and baffling to note such an erratic randomness of approaches, it is noteworthy that the pattern now lies in examining current American interests, rather than impulsive paranoia, as was the case with classic cyberpunk.

Techno-orientalism seemed to have been swept away in the apparently progressive wave. However, while there is little to be offended by in these texts individually, taking together a body of the feminist cyberpunk works, it reiterates the Orientalist idea of the necessity of the West (here, America), for the democratic and peaceful, if flawed, planet to inhabit.

Maureen F. McHugh's two novels - *China Mountain Zhang* and *Nekropolis* - have charted cyberpunk on two different lands. The former is set in China that has now become the most important nation in the futuristic world and is also an autocratic state, the latter in the theologically fundamentalist futuristic Morocco.

In *China Mountain Zhang*, the parallels between the villainous Japan and the villainous Chinese are difficult to miss - In 22nd century, China has replaced America as the world's dominant political, economic and cultural capital, following a political revolution in America that has displaced its capitalistic economy and brought in an era of socialism - the latter becomes akin to a third-world dump following a financial crisis, while China rises in economic importance, and consequently, in cultural importance. Chinese phrases, Mandarin itself, Chinese dress and cuisine and Chinese genes suddenly become the next-gen cool things, the way everything symbolizing America/the West is hip now. With the Great Cleansing Winds in the US, followed by a Second American Revolution and a Second Civil War, the status-quo is changed.

Quite akin to classic cyberpunk where everything and everyone non-Japanese is marginalized by the ruling Japanese, in *China Mountain Zhang*, everything non-Chinese, non-straight, non-beautiful is frowned upon. Relegated to the minority, three characters struggle to survive in a rigid, ruthless state. Zhang Zhong Shan (Rafael), the protagonist, is a young gay man of mixed heritage, a Chinese father and Hispanic mother - born in Brooklyn and having

undergone gene splicing in infancy in order to look more 'Chinese' (the reverse of what the Chinese are doing today - double eyelid surgery, for instance, to look more 'Western') and therefore attempting to gain social leverage as well as possible opportunity to study and live in China, his life takes a series of unexpected turns as he navigates through the turmoil of sexuality, cosmetically altered genes, identity and cultural legacy in and out of America, China and the Arctic.

His partner Haobai, a Chinese man cursed with homosexuality in a future that punishes it by death, meets his logical end, while San-Xiang, a young Chinese girl in the US struggles to come to terms with her own marginalization on account of her ugly face, and then with the consequences of her cosmetically-enhanced beauty in the form of rape. All characters not living in accordance with the Chinese definition of normal end up in a space where minority is not simply a number, but rather one's position, and hence, their value, and anything on the lower side of the valuable ladder is disposable, and all three marginalized characters meet fitting ends.

In *Nekropolis*, Morocco is represented as an ultra-conservative technologically-equipped state where people are *jessed*, or permanently chemically indentured, and socially discarded as sub-humans, with no escape but death. Hariba, a jessed human elopes with a *harni*, a bio-engineered being, essentially an android, and therefore also condemned to be sub-human, to seek her freedom, and struggles to escape to Spain, a "Western" democratic and tolerant, secular land.

While her family and the state spurns her, she is “rescued” by the kind-hearted West to be smuggled into Spain, but the process fails since the Moroccan regime is “too” inflexible and dangerous.

In both these narratives, the only fault of the protagonists was that they were subjected not to technology, but ideology - technology merely becomes a weapon in the hands of the oppressive regime, much like Orwell’s 1984, to contain potentially dangerous elements. The texts examine marginalization from the perspective of the LGBTs, straight women and androids, but unlike classic cyberpunk that probes the impact of technology on the concept of life, hardly even glances upon the aspect. The protagonists try to escape their fates but are brutally persecuted, while America, now weakened, can only stand back and watch helplessly.

While it is highly commendable that the victims are no longer working-class straight white Christian male figures, but classless non-white, non-Christian, often non-straight, non-male people, it is necessary to note that neither gender, nor sexuality are looked at from the lens of technology, and race is simply used for the sake of variety rather than a serious examination of how technology would impact non-Western lives. These are not Japanese, or Chinese or Moroccan futures, but essentially non-American futures that would push back humanity as it hurtled forward into technology.

However, there was also a simultaneous contradictory strain presenting itself. Fiction such as Paolo Bacigalupi’s *The Windup Girl* and Linda Nagata’s *The Bohr Maker* are symptomatic of doing

away with techno-Orientalism, and despite employing a variety of locations, condemning not the local governments, but vested American interests, for the chaos and disorder, while also simultaneously engaging into feminist and queer discourses.

The Windup Girl is a Nebula and Hugo Award-winning futuristic bio-punk novel is set in the 23rd century Thailand, when global warming has depleted all natural energy sources and overturned all remnants of the past, familiar world. While Thailand has escaped that fate and managed to evolve a system whereby it has decreased substantially American dependence and thus, interference in its sustenance, it is in throes of internal political turmoil, of which American biotech corporation AgriGen tries to take advantage with the intention of invading local farming to promote mutant diseases through crop-based bio-terrorism to keep American economy alive.

While it examines the conditions of the poor locals caught up in trying times from a class-framework, it is simultaneously feminist in its leanings by examining Emiko, a gynoid with consciousness, who is abused as a prostitute, one of the few options open to women for survival in a chaotic land. However, it is not the Thai government that is the oppressor; rather, it is the American model of political hypocrisy that is so prevalent today that is being fiercely and openly critiqued.

With *The Bohr Maker*, it is set in an unidentified location somewhere in Asia, where half of the land is under the control of the Commonwealth, with a white Christian woman for its head, which strictly

controls biotechnology and ensures the new systems are registered and do not exceed its stringent specifications – in order to stay in power and do away with potential better programs that may usurp its dominance. The other part is Spill, that has decided to remain independent of the coalition, but which is nevertheless governed by Commonwealth laws on bio-tech, making it a ripe place for all illegal bio-tech and their Makers to indulge in black-marketing. A slum-infested, poverty-ridden, ugly place, the under-belly of the squeaky-clean Commonwealth is what the Spill looks like. While the world's first posthuman Nikko, a string of programming about to expire tries to steal a powerful program called the Bohr Maker to survive, the program escapes into Phousita's mind, a native prostitute who understands nothing and struggles to simply survive in the Spill, while the Commonwealth authorities try to hunt her down to retrieve the Bohr Maker she unwittingly carries in her brain.

In *Archangel Protocol* by Lyda Morehouse, the year is 2076 but the setting is the Western world itself. A quarter century before, the dropping of Medusa bombs in a global world caused havoc - followed by a resurgence in religious beliefs and aversion to secular science. A new world where most people in the world are linked by the LINK systems embedded in their skulls, but which resents a government favoring science over religion, and thus, in their eyes, war over peace.

Deidrei, an ex-cop suspended from her job and excommunicated by the Catholics for her possible involvement in the assassination of the Pope is now hired just before election time by Archangel Michael

to expose to the world that Archangels, who appear only on LINK, are but technical constructs. The plot treads the delicate religious issue of whether angels have adapted to technology or whether technology is masquerading God. However, despite being set in America, and the prominent suspects being the oppressive Catholics, the novel has a complex set of characters, some Muslims, some Jewish, and with no clear protagonists or antagonists - rather, it is a Christian theocratic state with a diverse set of questionable characters, beliefs, religions and motives.

It is striking that there is no chronological pattern to these works that could explain the shift in attitudes: While *China Mountain Zhang* was written in 1992, *Nekropolis* was penned as late as 2001. The *Bohr Maker* was published in 1995, while *The Windup Girl* was published in 2009 and *Archangel Protocol* in 2001. All four are American authors, and yet diverse in their approaches. While McHugh's universe makes American presence at the global centre stage not only pleasant but necessary, Nagata and Bacigalupi almost hold the USA responsible for the chaotic condition of the future, while being unnervingly close to what American forces are doing today all over the world. Morehouse sets the future in America, but one ruled by their own Christian theocrats, but still plagued by their trademark hypocrisy and hidden motives for power and dominance.

A key to explaining this could lie in the fact that America tried to systematically sully Japan's reputation in the world through the 60s and the 70s through popular imagination, since Japan was a real-

life threat, and not simply a fictional threat. A Japanese future could very well be the fate of Earth, where Japan would displace the USA to gain a place that the USA currently holds and hopes to retain for the future. With the early 90s, Japan became a lesser threat to USA's position, as China and the Middle East surged as economic threats.

More critically, Roger Luckhurst situates cyberpunk within the realm of the American obsession with militaristic development and the 1980s Star Wars program, saying:

It is important to convey that SF was as ideologically driven as any other field of cultural production in the 1980s. Whilst most critical commentary has been on the postmodern/SF convergence, cyberpunk was formulated in the way it was precisely because of the prominence of the SF megatext in the fantasy life of the American New Right. (202)

With its market for cheap goods, China overtook the manufacturing economy and posited a sudden and very real threat to the American economy. While capitalism was celebrated as the best possible solution to a civilized life, China, despite following the rigid communist model, effectively brought economic prosperity, and removed destitution, though it has its fair share of poor people. Chinese citizens, even the poorest of them, enjoyed a basic decent lifestyle that was denied to the poorest in the world's most developed capitalist economies. China suddenly rose into prominence on the political global stage, then effectively gaining seats in various Western international councils such as G8+5 and

G20, and also participating in international non-Western councils such as BRICS, SAARC, indicative of a real threat it was posing to the USA as a strong contender.

To Terence Whalen, it is symptomatic of wider American sentiments, particularly "Reagan's America":

Emerging as it does in the context of late capitalism, cyberpunk is both inspired and stunted by the social process which enables thought to be alienated from its producer and exchanged as a commodity. The grimmest cyberpunk is haunted by the suspicion that information is not merely the socially average form of knowledge, but rather the form taken by capital in the signifying environment (79).

With the Middle East, clashes with the Islamic religion as a culture propagating hatred and ultra-conservativeness are used as part of US policy as a part of its continuing trend of mudslinging. The most effective way of countering and controlling the Middle East for its massive oil reserves is to highlight the necessity of American involvement in the area, easily argued by its claims to gender equality, human rights, democracy and secularism. By highlighting a future that could result in the loss of these four American values if the Middle East was visited by invasive technology, America almost justifies its widely criticized armed incursions in the region.

Cyberpunk fiction produced by America, whether Classic cyberpunk or American feminist cyberpunk, seems to be motivated primarily, in its political aim of disturbing the popular sentiment in

favor of American political strategies, regardless of how extreme American measures may be. Carrying ahead the idea of Orientalism as Said put it, AC seems to have indulged into Techno-Orientalism, in the words of David Morley and Kevin Robbins who have argued in their influential book *The Space of Identity* that “Western stereotypes of the Japanese hold them to be sub-human, as if they have no feeling, no emotion, no humanity” (172). Naoki Sakai says on this point,

The Orient does not connote any internal commonality among the names subsumed under it; it ranges from region in the Middle East to those in the Far East. One can hardly find anything religious, linguistic or cultural that is common among these varied areas. The Orient is neither a cultural, religious or linguistic unity. The principle of its identity lies outside itself: what endows it with some vague sense of unity is that Orient is that which is excluded and objectified by the West, in the service of its historical progress. From the outset the Orient is a shadow of the West. (198)

Essentially, it is a magnification of the issues that the USA faces with each of the countries it has taken up. With China it is a triangle of economics, capitalism/communism and human rights, while with Morocco, it is a combination of gender equality, human rights, democracy and secularism. With Japan, it used to be economics, democracy and human rights. A common thread running through them all, then, is that the removal of America from the centre stage would ultimately result in a loss of human rights, with the modus operandi of reaching this end would differ from country to country,

depending on which nation ascended the seat of power. In such case, feminist cyberpunk has done nothing more than replacing an earlier enemy with a current adversary, by superficially engaging a few popular cultural markers of the new country in question.

If the Orient was invented by the West, then the Techno-Orient also was invented by the world of information capitalism. In “Techno-Orientalism”, Japan not only is located geographically, but also is projected chronologically. Jean Baudrillard once called Japan a satellite in orbit. Now Japan has been located in the future of technology. Morley and Robbins say,

If the future is technological, and if technology has become ‘Japanised’, then the syllogism would suggest that the future is now Japanese, too. The postmodern era will be the Pacific era. Japan is the future, and it is a future that seems to be transcending and displacing Western modernity.

What the American psyche projects through its cultural productions, including cyberpunk, is its paranoia of the Japanese taking over the charge of the world, and turning it into a bleak place, ridding it of all humanity that American has striven to keep alive since its inception as a democratic nation. What comes across then, is a heavily technologized Orient, in place of the Saidian “backward” Orient, with the recurrence of brutality, lack of civilization, and unbridled ambition.

This very idea that the Americans extend to the Japanese, is then also applicable to the other countries it uses as its settings. It is not the setting

that makes any real difference, since it is a political project and not an examination into the future.

Fredric Jameson too, in discussing cyberpunk's links to postmodernism and political reality, remarks that cyberpunk is "the supreme literary expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself" (Cultural Logic 157).

With researches such as Leonard Patrick Sanders' doing rounds in the academic circuit exposing the hidden agendas of classic cyberpunk in portraying Japan as the ruthless, evil stepmother of futuristic dark mechanical lands, feminist cyberpunk apparently overcame the obsession with the Japanese, replacing the latter with a number of random, pattern-less places, it has only reiterated its stand more cleverly and ambiguously, and with less obvious paranoia.

While it could be argued that the pattern is broken in a number of novels, as mentioned earlier, it is important to note that, these "Damsels-in-distress" nations have no real life fierce conflicts with the USA. Rather, they are developing countries which exhibit signs of gradual progress while not having ends conflicting with American ends directly. While China, Japan and the Middle East are already empowered in some way to have a voice in the system, these countries are still slowly building up a local system that would in the future earn them an upward political mobility.

For such quiet, uncontroversial nations such as Thailand or much of South East Asia, the USA has no easy fault to find – these narratives, then, concentrate on such nations as inherently weak to

sustain global leadership, by portraying them as innocent, but incapable of leading the world in the future. American literature simply makes it a chaotic, messy, broken place prone to outside manipulation and governed by instability, uncertainty and corruption.

These places end up as victims in need of rescue, where some kind, ethical, revolutionary Westerner turns up to fight its own nasty, selfish American corporate, and thereby liberate the weak countries in question. These settings ultimately reiterate the traditional fairytale structure where an innocent damsel is rescued by the prince, who fights his own evil stepmother and ends the reign of disorder, thus marginalizing the vicious corporate as only a stray, occasional enemy, which the American citizen himself is both willing to and capable of defeating, and not an American stereotype.

While the Japanese zaibatsus are doomed to represent the entire Japanese race, these American antagonists are simply the proverbial bad apple in an otherwise good bunch, but a bunch strong and conscientious enough to eliminate its own bad apple without any false sentimentality.

Thus, whatever the case, the Americans become the upholders of security and prosperity in the technological future, the defenders of justice and humanity, positing a world that cannot survive the downfall of America. What it really defends, though, is its own power and the capitalistic structure that would enable it to do so.

The only novel to project an American future set on the American soil and governed by ultra-

conservative White Catholic homophobic fundamentalists was Morehouse's Archangel Protocol, wherein the very existence of religion is questioned and suspected to be a charade in the quest for power. The dizzying religious identity of cyber entities only heightened the suspicion that the USA was fooling its own citizens in the name of peace and tradition, and that angels were nothing but codes of programming.

Commendable as it is to dare to portray America as both the victim and the perpetrator, the novel ends on a very tame note, unlike the radical premise on which it began, thereby diluting the possibility of actually opening up a political discourse.

Understandably, the term "feminist cyberpunk" has to be taken quite literally, as one interrogating and negotiating discourses covered under the umbrella term of feminism, while leaving banal nationalism out, since race and gender issues have often been neglected in a combined analysis. It has a lot to do with the fact that most feminists, for very long and in overwhelmingly large numbers, have been Westerners, speaking for themselves, for whom the non-White hardly qualifies as even human, so as to leave out any discourse of gender that comments on race as well. First World Feminism has marginalised race as an inconsequential parameter for examination, rendering them the "Other", the way techno-Orientalists did with males in classic cyberpunk.

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